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## Coming to Terms with the Communist Past in Romania: An Analysis of the Political and Media Discourse Concerning the Tismăneanu Report

Alina Hoge<sup>a</sup>\*

### Abstract

This paper looks at the public debates about the communist past, as triggered by the final report on the communist dictatorship in Romania (the Tismăneanu report) and its presidential endorsement in December 2006. The paper employs narrative and discourse analysis to examine the political reactions to the official condemnation of communism, as well as its reflection in several Romanian newspapers. The Tismăneanu report was meant to be a 'redressive ritual' that would provide closure to a traumatic past by retrospectively denouncing the meaning of communism, but instead it generated more public debates and political turmoil. This indicates that the contorted path taken by Romania to confront its communist past is not a finished process yet, but rather represents a dynamic field in which social actors are fighting over which events and actors in the past should be collectively remembered, and especially how they have to be represented in the collective memory of post-communist Romania.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** collective memory, communism, Romania, politics, media discourse

### Introduction

More than twenty years after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, Romania is still struggling with its communist past. The Romanian 'revolution' remains a debated topic as there is no consensus among scholars, politicians, journalists, and lay people on what exactly happened in December 1989 (revolution or coup d'état) and on the name this political event should take (see more on this topic in Tileagă, 2008 and Văcărescu, 2004). The coming to and remaining in power of the successors of the communist party (between 1990 – 1996 and 2000-2004), highly intolerant of opposition, blocked or delayed different attempts to address and correct the injustice of the communist past (Tileagă, 2009) and situated Romania among the reform laggards in Eastern Europe (Kuzio, 2008). Although public intellectuals, former dissidents and civil society groups<sup>2</sup> repeatedly called for retrospective justice to confront the past, official criminalising of the totalitarian regime in Romania did not take place until 2006. Thus, Traian Băsescu was the first Romanian president who officially condemned communism on the basis of an extensive report about the crimes of the former regime. The political reactions that the presidential endorsement of the Tismăneanu report generated, as well as its reflection in several Romanian newspapers, are discussed in this paper from the perspective of the negotiation over the past in the collective memory of post-communist Romania.

The report itself was addressed in several academic papers (e.g. Ciobanu, 2009; Tileagă, 2009; Cesereanu, 2008; Tanasoiu, 2007; Tismăneanu, 2007; King, 2007), however, an analysis of the media

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2 e.g. Group for Social Dialogue, the Civic Alliance, Association 21 December, Association of Ex-Political Detainees

debate regarding the official condemnation of communism was not done yet. Such an inquiry is necessary for a better understanding of the dynamics of the public discourse about the communist past, given that besides politics, mass media (and particularly journalism) represent a powerful social actor in attributing meaning to the surrounding world: 'the journalistic field, along with social sciences and politics, holds a central place in the wider field of power' (Rupar, 2010, p. 5). According to Fairclough (1999), social research on politics should also inquire into the public sphere and into the practices of public dialogue that are available for civic deliberation. In this respect, this article considers both the political and media narratives about the past and the present, following the Tismăneanu report, and builds on the scholarly body generated about the collective remembering of communism in Eastern Europe. Specifically, this article looks at how actors in Romanian politics use the past for present purposes and how the past, the present and the future are represented in national Romanian newspapers, attempting to answer the following research questions:

What are the main themes in the political discourse regarding the condemnation of the communist regime in Romania 17 years after the fall of communism?

Which narratives about the communist past and the present political context emerged in the main Romanian newspapers as triggered by the Tismăneanu report and its presidential endorsement?

To what extent does the presidential endorsement of the Tismăneanu report represent the views of the Romanian people?

The next section lays down the theoretical perspectives on collective memory, media and politics. It is then followed by a short overview of the Romanian political and media landscapes to better understand the social and political background of Romania, before addressing the above-mentioned research questions.

## Collective memory and the investigation of the past

Previous studies on media, politics and collective memory have indicated that both journalists and politicians refer to the past as exemplary experiences that are brought to public debate in order to explain the present and predict the future of a society. In other words, the narratives about the past construct linearity and/or causality of events so that the past, the present, and the future are presented as logically linked to each other (Edy, 2006; Kitch, 2005; Irwin-Zarecka, 1994).

According to Halbwachs (1980[1950]), remembering implies the reconstruction of the past from the perspective of the present: 'a remembrance is in very large measure a reconstruction of the past achieved with data borrowed from the present, a reconstruction prepared, furthermore, by reconstructions of earlier periods wherein past images had already altered' (p. 69). Therefore, the past is not fixed and history can often be re-written according to present political interests (Zolberg, 1998). For instance, Ion Iliescu, the former president and founder of the Social Democrat Party in Romania, was one of the individuals referred to in the Tismăneanu report as an agent who supported communism in Romania and, thus, allowed for the dictatorship of Ceausescu to stay in power. Iliescu never denied his Marxist orientation, but he has always presented himself as a victim of the Securitate (the secret police in communist Romania).<sup>3</sup>

The images of the past are (re)constructed within social groups: 'remembering takes place in the social context' (Miztal, 2003), which implies that memories are constrained by the group's perspectives on the past. Others can reinforce or, on the contrary, block our remembrances. Notably, those in power influence what a society should forget and remember (Zerubavel, 1996; Bodnar, 1992; Savage, 1994), while the use of the past becomes a tool of legitimisation: 'Collective memory is a

<sup>3</sup> See 'Patimile' lui Iliescu în încleștarea cu Securitatea (The 'passions' of Iliescu in the struggle with the secret police) in *Evenimentul Zilei* on August 14, 2006, available at <http://www.evz.ro/detalii/stiri/patimile-lui-iliescu-in-inclestarea-cu-Securitatea-407547.html>

precious resource, after all, for maintaining social bonds and claiming authority, for mobilizing it and legitimating it' (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994, p. 67).

Schwartz (1988) defined collective memory as a way to make sense of the present: 'Collective memory thus appears as a model of the present: a reflection of collective needs, fears, and aspirations' (p. 2). In other words, present events get meaning in historical context. In the case of Romania, as well as of other countries in Eastern Europe, the past has been widely used to justify the economic and social problems that characterised the post-communist transformations.

Communication scholar Barbie Zelizer (1995) claimed that collective memory 'helps us to make connections – to each other over time and space, and to ourselves' (p. 226). Collective memory is then an ongoing process of reinterpretation of the past, which shapes collective identity (Wertsch, 2002; Zelizer, 1998; Anderson, 1983). Irwin-Zarecka (1994) pointed to the paradox of the term 'collective memory': on the one hand, 'collective' implies consensus, but on the other hand, collective memory is often 'a site of intense conflict and debate' (p. 67).

Although collective memory is a process of negotiation among competing versions of the past, one cannot ignore the extreme cases of totalitarian regimes, where politics/states tried to control collective memory. This was the situation in the former Soviet Union and the satellite countries of Eastern Europe. One change accompanying the fall of communism in this region was the possibility of a freer reinterpretation of the past, less controlled by the state and, therefore, more contested in public debates. In this context, the communist past might be understood as a social schism between those who suffered before 1989 (victims) and those who played important roles in enforcing the communist ideology (perpetrators), with a majority of people situated in between.<sup>4</sup> The initiators of the 2006 report about the communist crimes hoped to clarify a chapter in the Romanian history; however, their attempt managed to divide the political scene in Romania and generated more public debates. The narratives that emerged from these debates are presented in the second part of this article.

The investigation of the communist past represented a 'redressive ritual', designed to solve the tensions between the former communists still in power and those who wanted a radical break with the past by calling for a lustration law and trials of communist perpetrators. Edy (2006) defined redressive rituals as the official responses to a social conflict. Their goal is not necessarily to restore order, but rather to attach meaning to what happened. Redressive rituals are situated between events and memories. While they share a retrospective approach with memory, they also become part of the events in the collective memory (Edy, 2006, p. 60). Redressive rituals take the form of investigations, trials, and policies. In this context, investigations represent frames that 'define a problem, identify the agents responsible, evaluate the moral situation, and propose a solution' (Entman, 1993 in Edy, 2006, p.61).

The Tismăneanu report was seen by many as a political instrument, given that the commission included former dissidents beside scholars and had presidential support.<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, it cannot be ignored that many of the Romanian intellectuals have been the most fervent advocates of neoliberalism, thus, rejecting social democracy and the Western democratic left (Preoteasa, 2002). On the other hand, the report itself is normative, thus, being more than an objective historical account. The investigation of the past and the final report might stand for an attempt to (re)construct the past according to present interests, which, furthermore, can be linked to the understanding of national identity and unity. However, before discussing the report itself and the reactions it generated in the public sphere, a short account of the political landscape and the media structure in Romania is in order.

<sup>4</sup> The Communist Party in Romania had more than four million members in December 1989, while most of them suffered from the insane systematisation plan advanced by Nicolae Ceaușescu (see Boia, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> It should be mentioned here that without political support, the researchers would not have had access to many archives. It was for the first time in the post-communist history that a political actor granted full access for researchers to consult the communist archives. Even so, there were official institutions (such as the departments of national security) that tried to restrict the access of members of the Tismăneanu commission to the archives (see Ciobanu, 2009; and Tismăneanu, 2007).

## Media and politics in Romania

### The political landscape

Politics in Romania since 1990 have been shaped by three phenomena: the emergence of parties as unofficial successors of the former communist party (PSD, PD-L, PRM, PSM), the reconstruction of the historical parties that existed before Communism (PNL, PNTCD), and the creation of new parties (UDMR, PC, PNG, AP, PAC)<sup>6</sup> (see Pop-Eleches, 2008). Romanian politics rapidly turned from a single party regime into a multi-party system, which meant that no less than 27 parties registered for the presidential elections in May 1990, while 73 parties participated in the parliamentary elections in the same year (see Roper, 2000). The political landscape in Romania is still characterised by fragmentation, which usually leads to opportunistic coalitions during presidential and parliamentary elections. One of the most unexpected coalitions happened in 2009, when the political right and left ran together in the final round of elections with the hope of winning against Traian Băsescu and his party PDL (with a centrist-right political orientation).

The most powerful political formation after 1989, the National Salvation Front (FSN) was the immediate successor of the Communist Party. The execution of the Ceaușescu couple on December 25, 1989, legitimised FSN, as did the identification of the old regime solely with the dictator and his wife (Ciobanu, 2009). The Communist Party was dissolved on December 27, 1989. This represented a unique political act in Eastern Europe, used by the FSN to annihilate the opposition of historical parties, which were recreated by former members who survived imprisonment (Boia, 2002). Once the Communist Party ceased to exist, a member of the former nomenclature had become as non-communist as a dissident (ibid.); a situation that shaped the contorted path that Romania followed in the process of decommunisation (for an analysis of retrospective justice in Romania, see Ciobanu, 2009).

Between 1992 and 2001, several splits occurred in the FSN, which later led to the formation of the Social Democrat Party (PSD) and the centrist-right Democratic Liberal Party (PDL). The peculiarity of Romanian politics is that the offsprings of the Communist Party (although of different ideological orientation), alternated in governance with only one presidential exception. In 1996, a coalition of 18 political formations led by a historical party with a neoliberal orientation (PNTCD) won the presidential elections in Romania. The paradox of the former communists dominating the political scene, while denouncing communism, manifested itself in 2004 and 2009, when the two parties that qualified for the second round of the presidential elections were PSD and PDL (both successors of FSN).

### Media landscape

The mass media in post-communist Romania went through several phases of structural transformation, from political partisanship in the beginning of the 1990s, to tabloidisation, concentration and consolidation, and after 2005, to 'Berlusconisation.'

Given both the relatively low production costs and the public's craving for information and opinion after experiencing decades of totalitarianism, mass media developed relatively fast. The first common trend in Eastern Europe after the fall of communism was the boom of print media. In spite of the impressive number of media outlets, the former communist newspapers in Romania (*Adevărul*, *România Liberă* and *Tineretul Liber*) dominated the market in the 1990s (Coman, 2003).<sup>7</sup> After 1995,

<sup>6</sup> This is not an exhaustive list of the political formations in post-communist Romania. Many parties appeared and disappeared during the post-communist transition.

<sup>7</sup> The former communist newspapers became independent through 'spontaneous' privatisation in 1990 (see Coman 2003, 2010). *Adevărul* and *România Liberă* claimed circulations of more than one million in the beginning of the 1990s (Coman, 2003). At the same time, weeklies of political debate had a significant audience, but many of

the print media market became more stable and specialised, and the audiovisual more diversified (for a detailed analysis of Romanian media, see Coman, 2003; Gross, 2004, 1999).

During the last ten years, an increasing concentration of ownership has characterised the media landscape in Romania, when international media corporations entered the market. However, the consolidation process further increased after 2005, when Romanian entrepreneurs and political actors also became interested in the acquisition of media outlets. In this respect, the most important Romanian players are Dinu Patriciu, Dan Voiculescu, Sorin Ovidiu Vîntu, and Adrian Sârbu, usually referred to as media moguls (see more about media ownership in Romania in Coman, 2010; Preoteasa, 2004). The first two are also very active actors on the political scene and all of them are controversial public figures because of allegations of corruption or collaboration with the former secret police (see Tapalagă, 2010; Ghergut, 2010; Petru & Fotache, 2006; Cezar and Popa, 2010; Zaschievici, 2005). The acquisition of media outlets by political actors, as well as businessmen with close ties to politics, mainly for using them as political tools made the spheres of politics, media, and business overlap and further contributed to a crisis of legitimacy in Romania:

*There is less parallelism between media and political parties and politicians than there was in the 1990s and more a form of political press that belongs to politician-businessmen who use it for their own purposes; a situation in which in the culture of the media owners, the political and media functions overlap rather than proceed in parallel to one another. (Gross, 2008, pp. 129-130).*

This process, in which mass media in post-communist countries did not manage to gain an autonomous position in society, but rather are controlled 'either directly by governments or by vested interests networked with politics' (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2008, p. 91), is defined by Alina Mungiu-Pippidi as media capture.

Given the fluidity of both media and politics, it is not easy to pin down the political/institutional backdrop for journalism in Romania. One example in this vein is the switch in political support given by specific media outlets to different political actors. For instance, some media outlets that supported Traian Băsescu for presidency (and his coalition for government) in 2004 were fighting against him in 2009, while creating instead a favorable image for the opposition party.<sup>8</sup> In order to identify the main media narratives with respect to the Tismăneanu report in 2006, five national newspapers were chosen for analysis. This will be explained later in the paper, after a short overview of the process that led to the public criminalisation of the communist regime in Romania.

## The 'Truth' Commission

The Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania (PCACD), also known as 'the truth commission', was appointed in April 2006, when President Traian Băsescu agreed to follow the request of representatives of the civil society to condemn the communist past in Romania, provided there was enough scientific evidence to support such an action. President Băsescu appointed Vladimir Tismăneanu, a renowned Romanian born professor of political science at the University of Maryland, as the chair of the presidential commission to certify the communist crimes. Tismăneanu then appointed 39 experts (researchers) and members (public intellectuals and former dissidents). Such an official body gathered to inquire into the recent past was nothing new in Romania. At that time, several other institutions funded from public money were already involved in analysing the communist

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them disappeared after 1993, when they faced both the strong competition of the audiovisual sector and economic problems.

<sup>8</sup> The best examples here are *Cotidianul* and *Realitatea TV*.

injustice and crimes.<sup>9</sup> However, what made the ‘truth’ commission special was its capacity to provide a detailed account (over 650 pages) of the 45 years of communism in only several months. The report focuses on three main perspectives: communist institutions, dimensions and methods of repression, and individual actors involved in Romanian communism. It also includes a series of recommendations to be applied in order ‘not to forget, to condemn, to not repeat’ (the Tismăneanu report, p. 637).

The commission released the final report (also known as the Tismăneanu Report) in December 2006, less than one month before Romania became a member of the European Union. The report was endorsed by the Romanian President who held an official discourse in the Parliament on December 18, 2006, and publicly condemned communism as an illegitimate and criminal system.<sup>10</sup> The presidential endorsement of the Tismăneanu report raised criticism by both political opponents and some of the Romanian mass media. It has been argued that instead of being an accurate account of the past, the report was only a political tool for Traian Băsescu to gain political capital for himself and his own party (PDL). In spite of the criticism, the president claimed that the analysis of the communist past was intended to bring closure to a traumatic past, to boost national unity, and to show to the European Union that Romania is finally ready to move forward: ‘condemning the (communist) past arises as a priority of the present, without which we would carry in the future something that looks like the burden of an uncured illness’ (excerpt from the presidential address).<sup>11</sup> Thus, 17 years after the fall of communism, the report aspired to be proof that Romania is able to make a new beginning.

A new beginning represents a rupture in temporal continuity or, in other words, a historical shift that can become myth-reinforced through commemorative ceremonies (Connerton, 1989). Therefore, Romania was to symbolically break with its communist past once again. However, the report itself created more turmoil and public debates. The struggle for power between those with key positions before and after 1989 and those who wanted a radical break with the past has been an enduring process in Romania. One cannot ignore, for instance, that more than 100 members of the 2006 legislature (about one third) had occupied important functions in the communist regime (see Ciobanu, 2009). Given that societies are not homogeneous groups, the ongoing negotiations over issues/events that need to be publicly recognised and, furthermore, collectively remembered are inherent. These negotiations represent battles over the legacy of the past (‘mnemonic battles’ – Zerubavel, 1996), or in other words, debates among different memory groups (‘mnemonic communities’) about ‘the “correct” way to interpret the past... (and) what ought to be collectively remembered in the first place’ (Zerubavel, 1996, p. 295-295). These types of memory conflicts often emerge in the public arena (such as newspaper editorials or talk shows), as will also be shown in the following part of this article.

## Methodology

The empirical part consists of a twofold textual analysis. It first addresses the political discourses of the 2006 main actors, regarding the moral responsibility of the political class to assume the communist past, in a specific context (the EU pre-accession year). It then identifies and discusses

<sup>9</sup> According to Cesereanu (2008), one reason for which Băsescu was eager to create a commission for the analysis of the communist past was ‘the establishment of the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes in Romania (IICC) by a governmental decree during the Liberal party government under Călin Popescu Țăriceanu’s Leadership’ (p.275). At that time, the presidency and the government were in opposition to each.

<sup>10</sup> The conclusions of the report have been also presented two years later in the European Parliament, while a revised version of the report has been published as a history manual for elementary school. For more details see *Discuții despre comunismul din România* (Debates about communism in Romania) available on Ziare.com at <http://www.ziare.com/actual/eveniment/06-12-2008/discutii-despre-comunismul-din-romania-in-pe-330981>

<sup>11</sup> All the quotes from the Tismăneanu report, the excerpts from the presidential address and the quotes from newspapers were translated by the author. Both the report and the presidential address are available on the presidency website (<http://www.presidency.ro/>)

newspaper narratives about the past and the present as triggered by the Tismăneanu report and its presidential endorsement. The sample consisted of the editorials published in five national newspapers in December 2006.<sup>12</sup> The paper, thus, focuses on the immediate reactions of both politics and media to the unique act of publicly criminalising the communist past. By their format, editorials provide a deeper reflection on matters of public concern, since opinion texts in general reproduce accepted representations of social realities and ideologies (Fairclough, 1995; Haas and Fischman, 2010).

Fairclough (1995) defined discourse as a “field of both ideological processes and linguistic processes” (p. 25). In other words, discourse is socially constructed, but it also shapes social identities, social relations, and systems of knowledge and belief (see also van Dijk, 1991). While critical discourse analysis is concerned with ideology, hierarchy and power relations embedded in language, a narrative analysis looks at how stories are constructed, what conflicts are established and resolved, which social actors are involved, and how they are represented (Kitch, 2005; Kitch and Hume, 2008). In this respect, narrative analysis searches for themes, metaphors, binary oppositions, and structures of stories in order to understand the meaning of texts as part of the interactions between reading, the text and the reader. In my analysis of public discourse in Romania, I tried to identify the main themes regarding the confrontation with the communist past, looking for binary oppositions such as political responsibility vs. political opportunism, victims vs. victimisers, heroes vs. villains, success vs. failure, official vs. vernacular, and individual guilt vs. collective guilt.

The scrutinised newspapers are Jurnalul Național [the National Journal], Gândul [the Thought], România Liberă [Free Romania], Cotidianul [the Daily News], and Evenimentul Zilei [the Event of the Day]. They were selected based on general criteria such as circulation numbers, sales and frequency of distribution, but also considering their political position at the end of 2006. For instance, the first two mentioned titles were critical to the Romanian president Traian Băsescu, while Evenimentul Zilei supported him before the 2004 elections, as well as during the first part of the 2004-2009 presidential mandate. Cotidianul had a liberal stance at that time, while România Liberă has always supported the political right.<sup>13</sup> The sample included 34 editorials distributed as follows: Jurnalul Național (4), Gândul (7), România Liberă (6), Cotidianul (10), Evenimentul Zilei (7).

## Results

### Narratives in the political discourse

While the Romanian president and his party (PDL) endorsed the Tismăneanu report, representatives of other parties in the Romanian Parliament had different perspectives on the report and the condemnation of the communist past, in general. The Greater Romania Party had the most aggressive reaction with its members and supporters booing the president from the beginning to the end during his address, in spite of the presence of international guests.<sup>14</sup> The leader of the Greater Romania, Corneliu Vadim Tudor, is mentioned in the report as the court poet of Nicolae Ceausescu. His behavior in the Romanian Parliament was unanimously sanctioned by mass media. PSD also contested the Tismăneanu report and, thus, rallied with its honorific leader Ion Iliescu, whose name appears 28 times in the report. Iliescu was made responsible for supporting the former regime as a member of

<sup>12</sup> All the texts were found via the Internet – e.g. political discourses from the official websites of the political parties/leaders, and media texts from the websites of the analysed newspapers. The editorials were identified by using ‘raportul Tismăneanu’ (the Tismăneanu report) as keyword for the online search.

<sup>13</sup> Its founder and director for years Petre Mihai Bacanu was a former political detainee.

<sup>14</sup> Former dissidents from Eastern Europe such as Lech Walesa and Jelio Jelev, chiefs of the diplomatic missions in Romania, and the King of Romania Mihai I were guests during the public condemnation of the communist regime.



the communist elite, as well as for suppressing democracy in the early 1990s:

*The successors of this (communist) regime, grouped under the National Salvation Front, and led initially by Ion Iliescu and Petre Roman, continued to cultivate methods similar to those practiced by communists: the demonization of civil society and democratic parties, symbolic manipulation, unscrupulous propaganda and even the use of miners fascias to strangle the frail pluralism born on December 1989 (the Tismăneanu report, p. 13)*

Ion Iliescu and the PSD president Mircea Geoană chose not to be present at the presidential address. Other absentees included the president of the PNL, Premier Calin Tariceanu, and liberal Bogdan Olteanu, Chair of the Chamber of Deputies. One reason for their decision was the tension between PNL and the Romanian president.<sup>15</sup> While the prime minister agreed that Romania needs to know and take responsibility for its own past, he considered that the report was rather a political tool than an objective account of the past.

The main political reactions to the Tismăneanu report and its presidential endorsement included:

- the report came too late, both in terms of information and the political message (UDMR, PNL);
- the presidential endorsement was just public manipulation (PSD) and useless, given that communism was already condemned in 1989 (PSD, PNL);
- the report represents the celebration of communism by trying to instill methods similar to those used before 1989, e.g. making the report an official part of history (Ion Iliescu, PSD), and thus Ion Iliescu presented himself as a victim;
- the Tismăneanu report is just a manipulation of history (PSD, the Greater Romania Party)
- Traian Băsescu only opened the wounds of the past instead of focusing on the future of Romania and caused a scandal that Romania did not need before joining the European Union (Mircea Geoană, PSD)
- Traian Băsescu is a hypocrite because he is a former communist condemning communism (Dan Voiculescu, the president of the Conservative Party);

In summary, the main themes that emerged in the political discourse are related to timing (the right moment has already passed), authority (only a non-communist can condemn communism), political capital (witch-hunting), and a new beginning (through the closure of a traumatic past). The first one reinforces what Cornea (2007) contended about the common strategy of avoiding confrontation with the past in post-communist Romania. He identified two versions of the same argument: 'the time has not yet come' and 'the right moment has already passed'. In the discussed case, we rather find that the second version, which is also stronger given that it implies that the topic of the communist crimes, should not be opened anymore.

Another way to dismiss the Tismăneanu report was by contesting the authority of both the commission (which included public intellectuals with well-known liberal views) and the president (a former communist). The declared purpose of the report, reinforced through the president's discourse, was for the Romanian nation to finally assume responsibility for an inconvenient past so that the future will be different. According to the Tismăneanu commission, everywhere in the world where communism existed, it harmed and oppressed people:

*All of these should be known, assumed and condemned. For History, for the present and for a better future. In the same way in which ill people should know their illness and treat it. Even if this requires a surgery (the Tismăneanu report, p. 167).*

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<sup>15</sup> Olteanu's grandmother is also mentioned in the report as being guilty of supporting the communist ideology apparatus.

President Traian Băsescu went further and tried to explain the immanent crisis of legitimacy in post-communist Romania by referring to the communist ideology:

*My goal is to bring a real national reconciliation, especially when many failures of the past are still affecting us. Our society suffers from a generalized mistrust... we can see that the lack of respect for the human being is still present. Some could ask who gives us the right to condemn... the right to condemn is given by the obligation to make the state institutions function in a democratic society.... But in order to function, any administrative institution needs qualified citizens, not only professionally, but also qualified for democracy and freedom (excerpts from the presidential address).*

The president, therefore, emphasised the need to close a traumatic past and start a new beginning:

*This symbolic moment represents the account of what we experienced and the day when we all ask how we want to live from now on. We can overcome our past and make more progress in the future if we understand the reasons for which we cannot be more productive, more courageous and more confident in our resources (excerpt from the presidential address).*

Before moving to the narrative analysis of newspapers, more needs to be said about other reactions in the public sphere. The Tismăneanu report also triggered negative feedback from research institutions such as the *Romanian Academy* and the *Institute for Investigating the Crimes of Communism* in Romania, which contested the scientific value of the report. Some anti-communist associations complained that different protest movements had not been properly discussed (e.g. the union workers' movement in Braşov and Valea Jiului). This is an example of the struggle for representation in collective memory, as Ciobanu (2009) also noted: 'different groups reacted by competing amongst themselves for the highest honors in this anti-communist narrative, claiming a leading role that they may or may not have had' (p. 329). The Tismăneanu report also irritated the Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR) by revealing the relationship between important representatives of the church and the communist repressive apparatus. Following the report, BOR hired historians to investigate the communist past with the purpose of presenting a counter-report.

### Narratives in print media discourse

According to the theory of media capture, we would expect that mass media in post-communist Romania would replicate the political discourse, according to the positions expressed by political actors who are also media owners. It should be mentioned here that *Jurnalul Național* is owned by Dan Voiculescu; *Adevărul* is part of a media trust owned by Dinu Patriciu; the owner of *Gândul* is Adrian Sârbu; and *Cotidianul* was owned at that time by the controversial businessmen Sorin Ovidiu Vîntu.

The topics identified in the political discourse were also present in the analysed publications, but some new themes emerged. They are related to retrospective justice (the report should be followed by trials and policies), the need for a reformed left in society, and history vs. memory (the investigation of the past should include the testimonies of surviving victims). Although politics and media might overlap in post-communist Romania, the role of mass media as the storytellers of the modern society cannot be ignored. Journalists use narratives to place events in context and, thus, to tell a story that can be easily understood and remembered (Kitch, 2005, pp. 4-5). Although the details differ, the story might be recognised by the audience because it has been told before.

The theme of the right time to address the communist past was present in *Cotidianul*. The Tismăneanu report was described as a good initiative, but useless given that former communists are still in power as members of the legislature. Therefore, the condemnation and the personification

of communism would have changed something in the Romanian society only if it had been done earlier. *România Liberă* engaged in a dialogue with those who believed that the condemnation of the communist past came too late, by identifying the villain in the person of Ion Iliescu. According to this newspaper, Iliescu should be blamed for the negative aspects in the post-communist society:

*We have now, although with a big delay, a report to prove even to the non-believers the criminal and illegitimate character of the communist regime that oppressed us for 45 years. It is the same delay that manifested itself constantly in reforms, and in the real wish to join the free and civilized states. And this delay needs a name. We can simply call it Iliescu* (Prelipceanu, 2006).

In contrast, Traian Băsescu became a hero:

*Traian Băsescu is the first president who apologized in the name of the Romanian state for all the families who suffered during communism. He is the first state leader who requested that all the condemnations on political basis (from the communist time) need to be annulled. But for these things to become reality there is need of political support* (Fati, 2006).

Thus, the author suggested that the process of decommunisation would start only when the whole political class in Romania is ready to take responsibility for the communist past and further correct its injustices. *Cotidianul* also presented Traian Băsescu in a positive light, as the only political actor who cares about the communist trauma of the Romanian nation:

*Not the political class is the natural public of the Tismăneanu report, although the document will be first presented today in front of this type of auditorium. It will be a passive ceremony where the only responsible political actor will be President Băsescu* (Ungureanu, 2006).

The need for retrospective justice (following the recommendations of the Tismăneanu commission) is one of the themes with a high occurrence, however, it is treated with skepticism in editorials in *Evenimentul Zilei*, *România Liberă*, *Cotidianul*, and *Gândul*. For instance, although perceived as necessary, a lustration law was described as an unreachable goal, given that if such a law had been enforced, it would then remove many political actors from power. Other conclusions of the Tismăneanu report were perceived as unrealistic. For instance, one recommendation refers to the public display of communist symbols. According to *Gândul*, to forbid such symbols would be impossible as they were already part of the popular culture.

*Cotidianul* claimed that the Tismăneanu report brought more problems than it solved. By mentioning Dumitru Tinu as an agent of the communist ideological apparatus, the report gave the Romanian Club of Press (CRP) a puzzle to solve. After the journalist died in a controversial accident in 2002, CRP instituted a 'Dumitru Tinu' prize to be given every year to a successful media outlet. The editorial in *Cotidianul* ironically reads:

*Normally, this prize should not exist anymore.... However, if its initiators refuse to accept evidence, at least they could make a change regarding the object of this prize so that it rewards the zeal of those who are nostalgic of the communist press* (Morar, 2006).

Another frequent theme was the failure of the PSD to make a difference between a reformed political left and the former Communist Party (*Cotidianul*, *Evenimentul Zilei*, *România Liberă*). The absence of the PSD president Mircea Geoană from the presidential address and his decision to contest the Tismăneanu report was described by editorialists as the burial of the political left in Romania:

*The opposition to the condemnation of communism means that the PSD will equate social democracy with the Stalinist - Ceaușist repression, and the PSD with the FSN, thus getting a perverse effect that will sabotage “the values, the ideas and the left-wing parties” (Lupea, 2006)*

*The Tismăneanu report would have been a chance for the PSD. A superficial political vision made Geoană miss the contact with at least the real leftist people, who are still voting with the right-wing parties, because they do not have anything else to chose. (Rogozanu, 2006)*

It was also suggested by several editorialists that Geoană's decision to rally with Ion Iliescu and to contest the report would negatively affect the public support for the PSD in the future.

Both *Jurnalul Național* and *Gândul* contested the objectivity of the report by questioning the authority and morality of Vladimir Tismăneanu. While *Jurnalul Național* also suggested that the report cannot be a historical account because it only accounts for the negative aspects of the communist regime, *Gândul* claimed that the report is not an accurate representation of the communist past because it did not include any testimonies of the surviving victims. This means that vernacular expressions of memory could have diminished the suspicion that the Tismăneanu report is just another piece of history rewritten to serve present political purposes.

In summary, the newspaper narratives reinforced the main themes that emerged in the political discourse, but still advanced new topics of discussion. The publications generally supporting liberal views (*România Liberă*, *Cotidianul*, *Evenimentul Zilei*) were more prone to consider the Tismăneanu report as a redressive ritual that would bring closure to a traumatic past, while *Jurnalul Național* and *Gândul* questioned the objectivity of the report and saw it as a political tool used by Traian Băsescu against his political opponents instead.

## Discussion

The analysis of the political reactions indicated that the Romanian president did not receive support from the political class, except from his own party. Even those who generally agreed that a detailed investigation of the communist past was a good idea tried to dismiss the importance of the presidential address, claiming that such an action came too late to change anything in society. In the same vein, even the newspapers that praised the Tismăneanu report and its presidential endorsement, questioned the capacity of such an action to change the already established order, unless it was followed by trials and policies. To them, therefore, the condemnation of the communist past only remained a symbolic act. According to Tanasoiu (2007), the investigation of the communist past was triggered by the need of the Romanian citizens for truth and justice: ‘Ordinary Romanians believe it is time for the guilty to be held accountable, and they hope the report and the official condemnation of communism will lead to the prosecution of former communist officials, either as punishment or for compensation’ (p. 67). The president claimed to speak in the name of and for the Romanian people. While most of the newspaper editorials welcomed the condemnation of communism as a first step in the process of decommunisation, one cannot ignore that the Tismăneanu report became public at a time when an opinion poll conducted by the Open Society Foundation indicated that 53% of Romanians considered communism to be a good idea.<sup>16</sup> In this context, the investigation of the communist past might be

<sup>16</sup> See more details about the opinion poll conducted by the Open Society Foundation at [http://www.soros.ro/ro/comunicate\\_detaliu.php?comunicat=21#](http://www.soros.ro/ro/comunicate_detaliu.php?comunicat=21#). The number of people nostalgic for communism has rather increased in the following years, as subsequent surveys suggest. See, for instance, the 2009 report on nostalgia in Eastern Europe, conducted by the Pew Research Center, the 2009 study about Romania after 20 years of post-communism, conducted by The Bureau of Social Research in Romania, or the 2010 report about the public perception regarding communism, conducted by the Center for Public Opinion Survey.

seen as a tool to counteract nostalgia for communism and to diminish the possible popularity of the opposition, thereby legitimising the centrist-right leadership in power. The intention of the report fell in line with these goals. As Cesereanu (2008) observed, the report itself was intended 'to deconstruct the cliché that the theory of communism would have been benignly humanist and only its practice murderously harmful' (p.279).

In his address, the president also made it clear that the investigation of the past was necessary to also remind those who were nostalgic for the communist regime that the past was, in fact, different from how they remembered it 17 years after the fall of communism:

*There are also many people, who are overwhelmed by the hardships of the present and who seem to have lost the belief in the virtues of our democracy. They begin looking nostalgically to a past which starts to appear bright in the context of the hard moments of the prolonged transition. I am telling them that it is worthy to reactivate their memory. They should remember the cold, the hunger, the darkness and the humiliation that characterized our lives... (excerpts from the presidential address).*

Taking into account everything mentioned above, the report might be understood as an elite project justifying the current rule by using the communist past. The political act of the president was also addressed to the outside world, especially to the Western countries of the European Union, thus showing that Romania is ready to move forward.

One thing that this analysis clarified is that 'Communism' has many different meanings to different actors. For some, it relates to the former communist elites (including among them President Bănescu), which indeed makes the condemnation by the president seem like a farce. On the other hand, for others 'Communism' is more related to a method than to people. One should note here the rather brilliant inversion of the accusations the report levelled against Iliescu by Iliescu, who claimed that the report used a communist method of imposing a certain vision of the past. Communism is also lacking a clear definition in the Tismăneanu report, being referred to as regime, ideology, utopia, or a repressive and criminal system (see Tileagă, 2009).

Regarding the future political landscape of Romania, several observers have noted that Geona's abstention from the announcement of the report sealed the association between the PSD and the former Communist Party. However, this association might veil the fact that one aspect that is most disadvantageous to the PSD is its association with an elitist 'cleptocracy' and political barons in the country, stemming from developments which mostly happened after 1989. Further investigation is needed in order to clarify how extensively the supporters of the PSD are equal to those who remember the communist past in a positive light. In this context, the scapegoating of Ion Iliescu also deserves special attention, as most of the analysed media texts suggest that Iliescu is responsible for a messy present, the absence of an ideal political left, and an obstruction in knowing and assuming the recent past.

## Conclusions

The analysis of the public debates about the Tismăneanu report and its presidential endorsement shows that the communist past is still a sensitive topic in Romania. The report was intended to bring national reconciliation and to close the communist chapter of the Romanian past, but instead it generated more public debates and political turmoil. Different social actors engaged in what Zerubavel (1996) calls mnemonic battles, trying to influence the way in which they should be remembered in the future. Given that narratives that are successful in producing closure would also bring forgetting the trauma (e.g. Edkins, 2003; Sturken, 1997), the debates about the Tismăneanu report should not be evaluated negatively; instead, they prove that the complex nature of the 45 years under communism in Romania cannot be easily pinned down in a single narrative.

In conclusion, this article argues that the Tismăneanu report was meant to be a redressive ritual that would provide closure by retrospectively pronouncing the meaning of Communism. Instead, however, it reopened political debates in a time and culture that is increasingly prone to nostalgia for Communism. Therefore, the case analysed in this paper points to the unpredictability of collective memory, as well as to the nature of collective memory as a negotiation process among different societal actors on what should be remembered and how it should be remembered.

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